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2012 Spring Wine Guide: Four different palates pick 16 unique wines

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Faith Cathcart/The Oregonian

Mimi Martin, of the Wine & Spirit Archive, puts her palate to work at a tasting for The Oregonian's MIX magazine.

Wine Guide

Read The Oregonian's 2012 Spring Wine Guide.

In the wine world, someone's always complaining about scores. Wine critics' opinions are inherently subjective, the argument goes, so how dare they assign a score to something that's so much a matter of personal taste?

After all, it's not as though winemaking is an Olympic sport, in which you get an automatic number of points for "nailing the landing." In wine competitions and professional tastings, even the most knowledgeable critics and winemakers will disagree as to whether a

wine is middling, merely good or magnificent.

We don't assign scores here at The Oregonian; we just offer recommendations. And in our special wine guides, we like to publish picks from a variety of perspectives.

And so, if you'd like, choose your favorite palate from the accompanying stable of experts.

What do we drink when we're not on the job? Oregon wine, of course. And right now, specifically, here is what's tasting good to each of us.

Katherine Cole

Mimi Martin: Elegance and finesse

Mimi Martin is a frequent tasting panelist for MIX magazine and the co-owner of the Wine & Spirit Archive,

where she teaches wine certification and training courses. Mimi tends to go for lighter-bodied wines with an ethereal quality to them.

2008 Brooks Willamette Valley Riesling (\$18): Made from some of the oldest riesling vines in the Willamette Valley, Brooks riesling sings with notes of lime juice and zest, white peach and apple blossom, with beautiful beeswax aromas emerging as the wine warms in the glass. Light in body with bright acid zip, this wine is an ideal partner for anything you'd garnish with a squeeze of lemon: poached halibut, fresh sardines or raw oysters will all do the trick.

2010 J. Christopher Willamette Valley Sauvignon Blanc (\$18): It's a shame that there is so little Sauvignon Blanc planted in the Willamette Valley; the grape produces beautiful spring-scented wines in our cool climate and is the perfect partner for the delicious late-spring garden gems -- peas, fava beans, fresh herbs -- that are so challenging to partner with wine. J. Christopher's refined example offers notes of elderflower, freshly mowed hay and ripe pear underlined by the crisp acidity we expect from S.B. Pour alongside a fresh-herb and local chèvre salad for the ideal late-spring pairing.

2009 Bethel Heights "Foris Vineyard" Rogue Valley Gewürztraminer (\$18): For my palate, gewürztraminer is the large-footed giant of the wine world: a full-bodied, full-flavored, high-alcohol wine that tends to clobber the palate. So I was pleasantly surprised to fall in love with Bethel Heights' take on the grape. True to gewürz, this is still a big wine, but notes of rose petal, peach, poached pear and candied ginger manage to be graceful rather than overbearing. Citrus notes and bright acid on the palate bring a freshness that is often lacking in this varietal. This wine works as a flavorful aperitif, but would be particularly tasty alongside grilled pork sausages or a Thai coconut curry.

2009 Westrey Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$22): With so many wonderful pinots coming out of the Willamette Valley, I try to showcase as many as possible in our classes, but I must admit that over the past year Westrey wines have filled more than their fair share of glasses. I have a particular soft spot for Westrey's entry-level Willamette Valley pinot noir, which manages to be somehow delicate and bold at the same time. Aromas and flavors of strawberry and raspberry, dried forest leaves, rose potpourri and smoke offer a level of complexity rarely found at this price point.

Grant Butler: Food-friendly finds

The Oregonian's critic-at-large, Grant Butler, covers culinary and arts issues for Foodday, Living, A&E and MIX magazine. He's our resident vegan and also an accomplished home cook, with a nose for wine and food pairing.

2009 Lazy River Vineyard "Private Lumpkin" Yamhill-Carlton District Estate Dry Riesling (\$18): Years ago, Ned Lumpkin fell in love with riesling while serving in the U.S. Army in Cold War-era West Germany. After retiring from a career in commercial construction more than a decade ago, he and wife Kirsten planted Lazy River Vineyard in the foothills of the Coast Range, where their two acres of riesling thrive on the cold

growing site. This dry riesling is more full-bodied than you'd typically expect from this varietal, with grapefruit and citrus notes that make it perfect for pasta tossed with sautéed wild mushrooms or a spicy bowl of Asian noodles. Taste it, along with Lazy River's pinot noirs and pinot gris, at Carlton Winemakers Studio, the collective of boutique wineries that the Lumpkins cofounded with Eric Hamacher and his wife Luisa Ponzi in 2002.

2009 Illahe Vineyards Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$20): Oregonians love the DIY aesthetic, whether it involves crafts, fashion or artisan food. That passion certainly extends into the wine world at this mid-Valley vineyard located near Dallas, where all of the planting and picking is done by hand, and horses do most of the work that other wineries assign to tractors. Warm winds from the nearby Van Duzer Corridor funnel heat to the vineyard's south-facing slope, resulting in pinot noirs that are smooth and well-rounded, with notes of dark red fruits and spice coming through. While Illahe is known for its prized reserve wines, which are aged in oak as long as two years, the vineyard's everyday pinot noir proves a happy -- and affordable -- surprise. It's got a light body with subtle note of plums and cherries, and would pair nicely with a bowl of spaghetti marinara or simply grilled salmon.

2009 Cooper Mountain Vineyards Willamette Valley Reserve Pinot Noir (\$24): This small winery just west of Beaverton sits atop Cooper Mountain, and all of the wines are produced following organic and biodynamic farming practices. The goal is to reflect the essence of the land with each vintage, and this reserve strikes the right balance of acids and tannins, offering up undertones of the forest floor and cane berries as it lingers on the palate. Match this concentrated and full-bodied pinot with robust flavors, like grilled vegetables that have been doused in spicy chimichurri, or bold Mediterranean dishes, like Spanish paella or a Moroccan tagine of chicken or tofu set ablaze with harissa. And at just \$24, it's one of the best buys in Oregon right now.

2010 Mahonia Vineyard Willamette Valley Pinot Gris (\$17): You've spent an afternoon mowing the yard or going on a long bike ride. Now kick back on the deck and celebrate your accomplishments with this ideal warm-weather sipper, which has aromas of violets and mountain meadows, with a citrusy palate of grapefruit and lime that lingers through the finish. The flavors are straightforward and direct, and it's light-bodied, making it a perfect aperitif for backyard barbecues and finger foods like grilled and chilled asparagus spears, steamed artichokes, even chips and guacamole. And you don't have to drive to wine country to taste it: Local Whole Foods Markets were so excited about this wine that they bought all 90 cases produced.

Dana Tims: Straight-shooting selection

Oregonian Metro West reporter Dana Tims covers the ins and outs of wine-country business. He has tramped through enough vineyards over the years to know a solid wine that's a good value when he tastes it.

2010 RoxyAnn Rogue Valley Pinot Gris (\$16.50): Spicy bursts of grapefruit and nectarine, accented by

the fruity and floral fragrance of a bit of riesling and viognier (blended in for scent), make this anything but a generic Oregon pinot gris. It's not overshadowed by a relatively high 14.1-percent alcohol content and pairs nicely with scallops, sea bass and hazelnut-encrusted halibut. Flavors of lemon zest and a bracing minerality linger at the finish.

2010 Chehalem "INOX" Willamette Valley Chardonnay (\$19): This wine takes its name from the French abbreviation for "stainless steel," so don't be surprised by its crisp, steely delivery. Made from 100 percent Dijon clones, it is clean, light-bodied and wonderfully balanced. Leave the spicy foods for another day; this white will pair best with grilled vegetables, mild goat cheese, chicken or trout.

2010 Apolloni Willamette Valley Chardonnay (\$14): Oak does not intrude on this chardonnay, either; it saw only stainless steel and did not go through malolactic fermentation. Scents of pear and citrus give way to a fruit-forward wine of refreshingly balanced acidity, sourced entirely from estate fruit. You can't miss serving this alongside grilled salmon or chicken, a pre-dinner cheese plate, or a shrimp salad with asparagus.

2010 Troon Vineyard "Kubli Bench" Applegate Valley Zinfandel (\$25): Zinfandel has been the primary focus of this pioneering southern Oregon outfit ever since founder Dick Troon planted the vineyard in 1972. The grapes, sourced exclusively from an Applegate Valley microclimate known as the Kubli Bench, provide an eye-opening look at just how silky and nuanced an Oregon zinfandel can be. This red bursts with flavors of cherry and pepper; pair it with heavier meats and anything you might want to barbecue.

Katherine Cole: Looking for the next big thing

As wine columnist for The Oregonian and MIX, Katherine Cole loves to find up-and-coming vintners and showcase tomorrow's stars.

2010 J Wrigley Vineyards McMinnville Pinot Blanc (\$18): I'm always on the lookout for a new local pinot blanc, so I was delighted to come across this minerally white from a new label, J Wrigley. This blanc begs to be paired with raw oysters, steamed clams or mussels, or even cold smoked salmon. It starts out with appealing aromas of peach blossom and Meyer lemon, then progresses to a palate of spritzy seafoam and brine, with white pepper on the finish. The Wrigley family harvested their first estate fruit in October of 2011 and they're currently building a winery 12 miles southwest of McMinnville; I have a feeling we'll be hearing more about them in the years to come.

2010 Ebony "The Quarry" Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$32): Chris Mazepink has guts. When the former winemaker at Shea Wine Cellars and current director of viticulture and winemaking for Benton-Lane Winery in Monroe introduced his new label, Ebony, he made it primarily a direct-to-consumer brand. That is, if you want to order his wine online, you've got to join his mailing list. (In return, you'll get free shipping.) What does this mean? That this is a wine aiming for cult status. And this pinot, from Ebony's second-ever vintage, certainly stands out from the rest. It's juicy and silky, with an alluring texture imparted by the use

of oak (instead of steel) fermentation tanks. This is a pinot noir that will make you sit up, take notice ... and maybe even join that mailing list.

2010 Purple Hands Oregon Red Wine (\$19): Son of Carlton cult vintner Ken Wright and until recently assistant winemaker at ROCO Winery (owned by his mother and stepfather), 32-year-old Cody Wright is now focusing full-time on his own burgeoning project: Purple Hands, named for what impossible-to-wash-out purple grape-skin pigment does to every vintner's manos. From the 2010 vintage, Wright offers an outstanding pinot noir (\$30) from Stoller Vineyard fruit and this festive red blend of syrah, merlot, cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc sourced from Del Rio Vineyards in the Rogue Valley. Silky and spicy, its notes of ripe red cherries, tomatoes, plums, dark chocolate and jalapeño make it the kind of wine you'll want to pair with chili or barbecue sauce. Sample it over Memorial Day weekend at ROCO Winery in Newberg.

2009 Denison Cellars "Kiff Vineyard" Yamhill-Carlton Pinot Noir (\$38): Tim Wilson earned his winemaking stripes at large-scale producers such as Chateau Ste. Michelle in Washington, Edna Valley Vineyard in California and Benton-Lane Winery and Dobbles Family Estate in Oregon. So one might expect him to go big with his own new label. But Tim and his wife, Denise, made just 110 cases of their first wine, this spicy and enticing pinot from the ripe 2009 vintage. Bright and appealing notes of cherry and nutmeg are counterbalanced by food-friendly flavors such as rhubarb and orange peel, followed with an earthy finish. Is it worth splurging on a brand-new producer? If it's Denison Cellars, yes.

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